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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000107

SENSITIVE  
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STATE FOR WHA/CCA AND WHA/PD  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [CU](#)  
SUBJECT: CUBA BUTTONED DOWN FOLLOWING DEATH OF  
HUNGER-STRIKING POLITICAL PRISONER ORLANDO ZAPATA TAMAYO

REF: FEBRUARY 24 PUBLIC STATEMENT

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The situation in Cuba is quiet following the February 23 death of political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo from a prolonged hunger strike. Several sources reported that up to 50 Zapata supporters had either been detained or prevented from leaving their homes, all in central and eastern Cuba. In the midst of all this, the GOC is hosting a large Brazilian delegation led by President Lula da Silva. When confronted by the international press today at an event with Lula, Cuban President Raul Castro said that he regretted the death of Zapata. There is no coverage of the death in local press and little awareness of Zapata among average Cubans. Zapata's death has united, at least temporarily, Cuba's normally fractured civil society, with everyone from bloggers to political party leaders expressing shock and disbelief that the Government of Cuba (GOC) allowed Zapata to die. Zapata's families and friends thanked the USG for our efforts and solidarity. USINT has maintained regular contact with Zapata's family since his sentencing in 2004 and continued to stay in touch with the family during the final days of his life. WHA PDAS Kelly raised Zapata's situation directly with the GOC last week during the Migration Talks, and USINT invited his family to meet PDAS Kelly at an event hosted by the COM in honor of the delegation. END SUMMARY.

#### PREVENTIVE MEASURES TO QUIET SUPPORTERS

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¶2. (SBU) There was no evidence of political unrest following Zapata's death on February 23. Havana and the eastern provincial capital of Holguin, where Zapata hailed from, were quiet. The GOC has reportedly taken a number of steps to prevent protests and disrupt activists' plans to attend the funeral, which will be held tonight in Zapata's hometown of Banes, northeast of Holguin. Following Zapata's death, state security reportedly took immediate steps to collect the body and escort the family from the capital as quickly as possible. Independent journalists have reported that state security detained several dissidents in eastern Cuba and threatened others with arrest if they attempt to attend the funeral or lead any public protests. Multiple sources told poloffs that national police have surrounded the houses of

several opposition leaders in Banes, including that of Zapata's family, and are preventing members of civil society from approaching the house.

#### OFFICIAL SILENCE, STUNNED REACTIONS

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¶3. (SBU) While there has been no local press coverage of the death and few among the general public know anything about Zapata, word of his death spread quickly among civil society.

Zapata is the first political prisoner to die of a hunger strike in Cuba since Pedro Luis Boitel's death in 1972 and most activists seemed stunned at the news. "This is a disaster for Zapata's family," the leader of one human rights group told poloff, "but also for the GOC." Laura Pollan, spokesperson for the Damas de Blanco (a group composed of the female relatives of political prisoners), expressed disbelief that the GOC would allow a political prisoner to die. Zapata was not transferred to Havana until mid-February, when he arrived at a prison hospital in the capital, and he did not go to a larger, better equipped hospital until he was on the brink of death. By then, it was too late.

#### RARE UNION IN MOURNING

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¶4. (SBU) Zapata's death has succeeded in uniting Cuba's famously fractured civil society. Prominent blogger Yoani Sanchez, who normally shies away from traditional opposition groups, has reported extensively on Zapata's hunger strike and his death. Sanchez shot video of Zapata's mother, Reina Luisa Danger Tamayo, outside the hospital shortly after the death, then posted it on her blog. She also quoted noted human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez, while calling on

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other activists for outrage at Zapata's death. Fellow bloggers also reported extensively on his death. Martha Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca, who have been increasingly isolated from other opposition figures in recent months, joined the Damas de Blanco in making the long drive to Banes in an attempt to attend the funeral.

#### FAMILY, DISSIDENTS THANK USG EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF ZAPATA

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¶5. (SBU) Roque, Pollan and Elizardo Sanchez thanked USINT and the USG for our solidarity with Zapata during his ordeal, including our February 24 public statement. Throughout his detention, USINT had maintained contact with his family and met with Zapata's mother. Poloffs continued to receive updates from Zapata's family and supporters as the hunger strike progressed and his condition worsened.

¶6. (SBU) During the Migration Talks held in Havana on February 19, the delegation leader, WHA PDAS Craig Kelly, raised Zapata's case with Foreign Affairs Vice-Minister Dagoberto Rodriguez (Rodriguez claimed not to know of Zapata.) Zapata's mother, step-father and sister were also invited to participate in an event hosted by the Chief of Mission on February 20 in honor of the delegation. We learned later that the GOC scheduled them to visit Zapata at the prison hospital at the same time and told them that it was the "only" time available.

#### BACKGROUND: A DEFIANT BRICKLAYER-TURNED-ACTIVIST

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¶7. (SBU) At around 4:00 PM on Tuesday, February 23, 2010, political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo died in police custody in a Havana hospital following an 86 day hunger strike. Zapata, an Afro-Cuban bricklayer turned human-rights-activist, was arrested at the home of prominent activist Martha Beatriz Roque in March of 2003 while participating in a hunger strike in support of political prisoner Oscar Elias Biscet. Although he was arrested as part

of the "Black Spring" crackdown, Zapata was initially charged with minor, non-political crimes and sentenced to only three years in prison and thus is not included among the more famous 75 who were charged with political crimes and sentenced to much longer terms. Zapata's continued activism while in prison eventually earned him additional charges and a sentence of more than 25 years, as well as the distinction of being recognized by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.

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